

Authority, Law and the State

John Arthur Andrews

1895

There are two kinds of Authority: one which rules by Terror, and one which rules by Error. One is based directly on brute force; the other rests on the voluntary submission of those who are subject to it — a submission which is voluntary only through their ignorance. But as soon as any of them cease to be willing slaves, the authority of Force is quickly resorted to.

Anyone can understand and hate the tyranny which rests on simple aggressive violence. Yet it is far the less dangerous. Men only, submit to it while they have to. The other they submit to, to their own and each others' harm, when they need not; because they think it is their "duty."

If there are duties, the first duty of every man is, to be true to himself. True to himself in his own welfare — true to himself in sacrificing his common welfare, even, for the higher welfare he feels in making others happy. But that he may so be true to himself, he must be independent; his will must be free. He cannot be true to his own nature when he is the mere obedient puppet of another. In giving up his conduct to outside dictation, he becomes a mere machine — an idiotic body, to move at the command of another's brain, or of brainless blind custom — a voluntary lunatic.

The man who does so is false to himself, and false, too, to his fellow men; because he has ceased to move in touch with his and their needs, and has become a weapon against them, ready to hand for all who can profit by the control of such an obedient force.

Authority is the vested privilege of being obeyed. It means that the choice of your conduct and the voice of your conscience, are the choice and the voice of someone else. "The right of a man of having a life of his own to lead" is denied by this pernicious principle, which imposes conformity to itself as the first purpose and condition of human activities. Men are mere clay to be moulded in its machinery. It knows no good but obedience, no evil but failure to obey its dictates.

Law, or Rule, is the opposite of Reason. If you do a thing because it is the rule, you do it right or wrong, reasonable or unreasonable. If you do it because it is reasonable and right, you do it rule or no rule and legal or illegal. Law tempts to wrong by blocking the path of right with red tape. It forbids some acts which are wicked when done wickedly, but cannot prevent their being done wickedly, while it hinders the good from doing them justifiably. As all exceptions and exceptions-to-exceptions cannot be provided for (and if they could, regulating every case by a rule to itself, life by rule would be a secondhand affair) law is the compulsory treatment of some cases as they ought not to be treated, and enables tyranny and fraud to grow upon sharp practice. To establish a law is to create vested interests in all the abuses of which it is capable. Fools say

law is to restrict the wicked, so the good should not object to it. With everyone kept handcuffed, except on leave for purposes officially recognised, have only rowdies and pickpockets ground to complain?

The State is the organised conservatism of the state of things actually existing, and therefore the impersonation of all vested interests and privileges, the embodied affirmation of all vested liabilities and sufferings, which rules have created. If the function of the State is to regard the lawful interests of all classes, that means, to prevent new tyrannies and injustices from arising, and old ones from being got rid of. If its function is to adjust conflicting interests by forced compromise, that is to see that the lion only half devours the lamb, and that the lamb submits to be half eaten by the lion. If it exists to submerge individual tendencies, for the general good, that means for the good of those people whose interests lie most in the direction of suppressing others. When the lion and the lamb are merged into "One Corporate Body," there is no difficulty in determining which One!

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